SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Claude Albert Liggins

Moderated by LeAnna Welch

Thursday, May 26, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
Post Office Box 571
Jackson., Mississippi 39205

AU 977
SN 004

Participant: Liggins, Claude Albert

Title: *Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era* / Memories of Claude Albert Liggins, Thursday, May 26, 2011 / moderated by LeAnna Welch

Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit *"Freedom Rides: Journey for Change"* conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

WELCH: Ok, Speak Now recording number 004. This is LeAnna Welch, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Thursday, May 26, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Claude Albert Liggins.

LIGGINS: Thank you. As she said, my name is Claude Albert Liggins. I was born and raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Growing up in Louisiana, from the age of four, I saw that there was something wrong. I wasn't exactly sure what was wrong but I could see that there was a difference between how we were treated and how other people were treated, meaning white people. My first year of school was at the Catholic school. The first question I had in my mind, as I can remember, is "Why were all the nuns white and all of the students were black?"

Later on, I remember some years when I was between the ages of four and six, my grandmother took me downtown with her to a doctor's office, and I told her that I was hungry, so she gave me a quarter to go downstairs to get a candy bar. That was only about a nickel, but when I got downstairs I decided I wanted a hamburger. So, I like to say I staged my first sit-in. I walked into this restaurant, I sat down at the counter, the man came over and waited on me, took my order, took my quarter, and as I was sitting there waiting, a friend of his came in and he ask him what was I doing there. And he says, "Oh, he's waiting for a hamburger." And then the man that came into the restaurant said, "No, he doesn't have any business sitting here…He needs to get up." So the owner of the cafe then told me to get up and stand up against the wall. And that was the first lesson I learned about…it seems like you could always find somebody to do wrong from the suggestion of another person. I was only four years old—I mean between four and six—I say four and six because we lived in a particular house, you know, during that time. And, I don't know what I could have done, you know, I was just a little boy, with two grown men, no one else was in the café. And that hurt; in fact it still hurts to this day. And, there was always a question on my mind as to, you know, "Why did he do it?" and, of course, you know, I know why he did it, because I was—at that time—they were called, you know, a colored boy. I didn't like it. And during my lifetime I remembered it and I saw other instance of racism: we couldn't sit at the counters downtown, we couldn't ride the bus except in the back part, and if the back part was crowded and people were standing up, we could not sit in the front of the bus.

When I got to be in high school I had history—some history was taught—mostly civics. And in reading about the history of America, I remember a couple of things: One, There was a—what they called the Boston Tea Party—and I remember reading about that, and I, I says, "Wow, you know that's really something else." And, I wanted to be part of it, I had a great imagination, and I don't know where I got it from. My grandmother told me

one time when I was in my teens, she says “Boy, you're something else.” So I said, “What else?” and she says, “I don't know.” But, I wanted to be in that Boston Tea Party. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned that there was a black man that had participated in the Boston Tea Party.

And then, I don't know exactly when it happened but I remember reading something that Patrick Henry said. And he said, “Give me liberty or give me death.” And I read that and something just happened to me—I believe so strongly in that. And I always wanted to be part of America, but as I grew older, I learned that I really was not part of America. And when I was in my middle teens, maybe about 16, I got on the bus to sit in the white section. And in sitting in the, in the white section, there was only one lady there—one white lady up front—and in the back behind that sign that said “colored” and “white”—or “white” and “colored”—there were black people standing up, because there was no more seats in the back. The bus driver told me that I had to move, move to the back. I refused to move to the back. He told me he was gonna go call the police. So, when he left the bus to go call the police, the black people in the back was telling me, you know, “You need to get off the bus,” “You're gonna get in trouble,” “You're gonna get your parents in trouble,” and a whole lotta things to discourage me. And this one white woman, who was on the bus stood up, faced them, and told them that I had a right to sit there. That was a lesson that I learned you know, you can find a friend in places you never would believe that there’s anybody who would attempt to even be a friend. All of my life, in anything I have done, I remembered this woman and I have always been grateful, you know, to what she did. To me it took some courage for her to do that, ‘cause she didn't have to do that. She could have just sat there and just let it go, but she stood up and she told this group.

After…I’m going to skip ahead a little bit because after I was on the Freedom Ride and I was on my way back to California. They hadn't integrated the buses yet and in my hometown, I went into the white waiting room and I sat down and there was a man who came by and told me that I need to move—get out of—the white waiting room. And I told him that I wasn't leaving, so he was pretty upset. So he went and got the manager and told the manager that I was—he needed to tell me to move—and the manager just totally ignored him, and he went on about his business. Then a policeman came through. The policeman told him—told me—that I had to move. I told him I was not gonna move, and he went to the bus dispatch desk and he was calling somebody, and I believe that he was probably—well, I know—he was probably calling the police headquarters to find out, you know, exactly what he should do. Sitting there, seconds seemed like hours, you know sometimes even days, because you don’t really, you know, I was scared—I'm not gonna say I was not—I was scared. But I knew what I was doing, and I was not going to—I had no plans—on, on moving. But while I was sitting there, a young white girl about my age came in, and all

those empty seats, she sat right next to me. And I says, “Oh, my God, what's happening here?” I wanted to move, but that would have been showing some sign that I was scared. So this man came back over and told this young white girl that she should move away from me, and she just looked at him, and she threw her head back and she said, “Huh!” And she sat there until I left. I didn't say anything to her. I wanted to, but I wasn't sure. I figured I was doing enough just by being there, you know. But she sat there until I left. That's another example of somebody having some courage to…indicate that they did not believe the things that was happening.

And to back up a little bit, I came—when I was on that bus—and that—and they had—the black people in the back and the woman got up and told them that I had a right to sit there, unfortunately, I, I got off the bus. I was not afraid of going to jail, but the criticism I was getting got to me, I wasn't prepared for that. I was prepared to go to jail or whatever would happen, but I wasn't prepared for that. I got off the bus, and I cried all the way home. And I told myself, I says “I'm never gonna move again.” And I didn't.

In 1961 when the Freedom Riders left Washington, D. C., I was on my way home from work. I was a student at L. A. City College and during the daytime and I worked at night. And they said that a group of people—interracial group of people—left Washington and they were gonna travel down South to test the segregated facilities, to see if they could be—would be—served. Then I didn't hear anything about it for another couple of weeks, but I did say, “You know, you know, I really shoulda been on that bus.” So, when the bus got into Anniston and they firebombed it and broke the windows and slashed the tires and all of that, and then I heard about this on the radio, and I says, you know, “Boy, I really should have been on that bus.” And I was determined to join. And being in Los Angeles for a short time I didn't know really where to go. But there was a rally coming up with Martin Luther King, and so I said I would wait until then and see if I could find somebody that would…could tell me how I could join.

So, the rally started maybe about 4:00 or 5:00 at the sports arena; I got there at 10:00 in the morning and I waited all around all day. And then after Martin Luther King spoke, everybody else spoke, it was maybe about 10:00 o’clock—10:30—at night. They asked for volunteers and I volunteered. And they told me that I was too young. I was 20, and I needed my parents’ permission, I said, “Well, my parents are not here,” you know. So they wasn’t sure whether they could let me go, but I said, “Well, I'm going. Even if I have to go by myself, I'm going.” He changed his mind, but I was scared. I went, I had my own money to buy my own ticket, if necessary, because I didn't know that they were going to pay our way there. I flew from Los Angeles to New Orleans, my first plane trip. I never will forget, it was raining when we got there. We stayed in New Orleans, at least about three days getting the training on non-violence and what have you. And then on

June 25th, early in the morning, we left New Orleans on the Illinois Central Train, coming to Jackson, Mississippi. And, I was with a group of maybe about 14 people, and we were all scared because we really didn't know what we were—what was—gonna happen to us. When we got close to—when we got—just outside of Jackson, they had policemen lined up on both sides of the tracks, and it seemed like it just was a long line just that wasn't gonna end. So I remember when I stood up to walk out, I, I froze, and I was pulling myself forward by hanging onto the seats. And then we stepped outside, stepped into the white waiting room, and it was over in less than two minutes because they told us if we didn't move that they were gonna arrest us. So they arrested us. Boy, was I relieved to be, to be arrested because I didn't know what was gonna happen there but, you know, being in jail can be just as dangerous sometimes. But that was some relief. I ended up spending three or four days in the county and city jail. In the meantime, they took us to court, and the trial was over in about 15, 20 minutes for about 14 people. And then they took us to Parchman Prison. In Parchman Prison, I spent 43 days there. When I got there the first—some of the people who were on the first—group of Freedom Riders that was beaten in Anniston were still there. The man who was in charge of this reunion, Henry Thomas—Hank Thomas—he was my cellmate. It was two people in the bunk when I got there, and the bunk's about six by eight, so they had a mattress on the floor, and I slept on the mattress. And we used to sing a lot and Hank Thomas has this real, real heavy voice. And the guards didn't like us singing. And so we would sing and then they would tell us—they told us—that if we didn't stop singing, they were gonna take the mattresses. So everybody took the mattresses off of the bunk beds, put 'em on the floor, on top of mine and they did the same thing in other cell—cells—and told 'em to come get 'em. And they came and they got them. And then we kept singing and they said if we didn't shut up they were gonna put us in the hole. So, there are about 14 cells on each side of a wall so what they did was they took all of us and put us in the hole, that would have been…almost 60 people...three times 14, and all of the perspiration just came down and we were just standing right next to each other and we couldn't move in any direction. And I thought about it I said, you know this is the way they had us in slave ships. And some people you know they were excited and they were yelling, you know "Let us out! We can't breathe!" you know, and there was a little door that they opened to talk to people. And when he did that, they said, "Please let us out! Please let us out!" I didn't say, "Please let us out," because I thought we could stay there a little longer. I didn't wanna seem—I didn't want it to seem—like we were too weak, you know. And I was—I thought—if we'd be cool and we could stay there a while, not long, because all of the—with all of us—there, we had just sucked the air from—that—was in that little hole. 'Cause the only air that could get in there was right from underneath the bottom of the door. And, you know somebody yell out, "Please let us out! Please let us out!" and we had—they had—elected me spokesman for the group, and I didn't want to say "please." And somebody

said, “Please, sir. Please, sir.” Well, I definitely didn't want to say “Please sir.” So what happened is, the guard said, “If he says, 'Please let me out,' I'll let everybody out.” And what did he say that for? Boy, they jumped on me, you know, say, “Please let us out.” So, he looked at me; I looked at him. He smiled; I didn't smile. But I didn't wanna say, “Please let us out, sir.” I ended up saying it just to get those people off my back…okay. So they let us out, because he said if I said “please,” he would let everybody out so that's what he did. But a few days later, I was taken out of my cell along with Hank Thomas and Stokely Carmichael, and a man named Lawrence Twist from San Francisco. And they took us to another camp site. On the way to the camp site, they had white prisoners with shot gun guarding the black prisoners who were working on the side of the road. And they took us—we didn't know why they were taking us—because we thought they were taking us out to, to kill us. They took us to another camp. And this camp, as we got off the—out of the—the paddy wagon, this white prisoner with stripes aimed his shot gun at us and we thought surely he was gonna shoot us, because we were so far back in the woods, they wouldn't a been able to find us for a while. So anyway, we went inside—they took us inside—and it was this big dormitory but no one was in it. And we still couldn't figure out what—you know, why—they did that. So what—there were some holding cells in the back, they put us in the back and nobody slept, and we must have stayed there about three or four days, in the back. And, after 43 days I was released.

After that, I spent a lot of time in L. A. very active; I went to jail about three other times. I served anywhere from two weeks and in one demonstrations I served six months. We were trying to get the Voter Rights and the Civil Rights Bill passed, and another time I—we—were trying the Fair Housing Law passed. So I've always been active. Even in high school, I was active. I remember we used to get books, and they had stamped in there “Lake Charles High.” Our school was named W. L. Barkson [ph] High. And the books looked new, but the fact that they were giving us books that had gone to Lake Charles High first upset me, you know a lot. I couldn't do anything about it, but it upset me.

So one of the things about…the Freedom Riders that I have talked to, to become Freedom Riders it was something that happened to them in early—their early—life that made them angry, and when the opportunity came, that's what motivated them to want to be a Freedom Rider. All of us, that I have met was willing to give our lives for what we believe in, we were committed and determined to change the system. And it wasn't easy. We got a lotta criticism from a lotta different people. They called us agitators, rabble rousers, outsiders, Communists…and a whole lotta other names but we were determined and I'm so glad that I took the Freedom Rides. It’s

satisfying, and when I come to this place, and the way we have been welcomed here, I'm ready to go again. And I thank you.

WELCH: Thank you. Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

INDEX